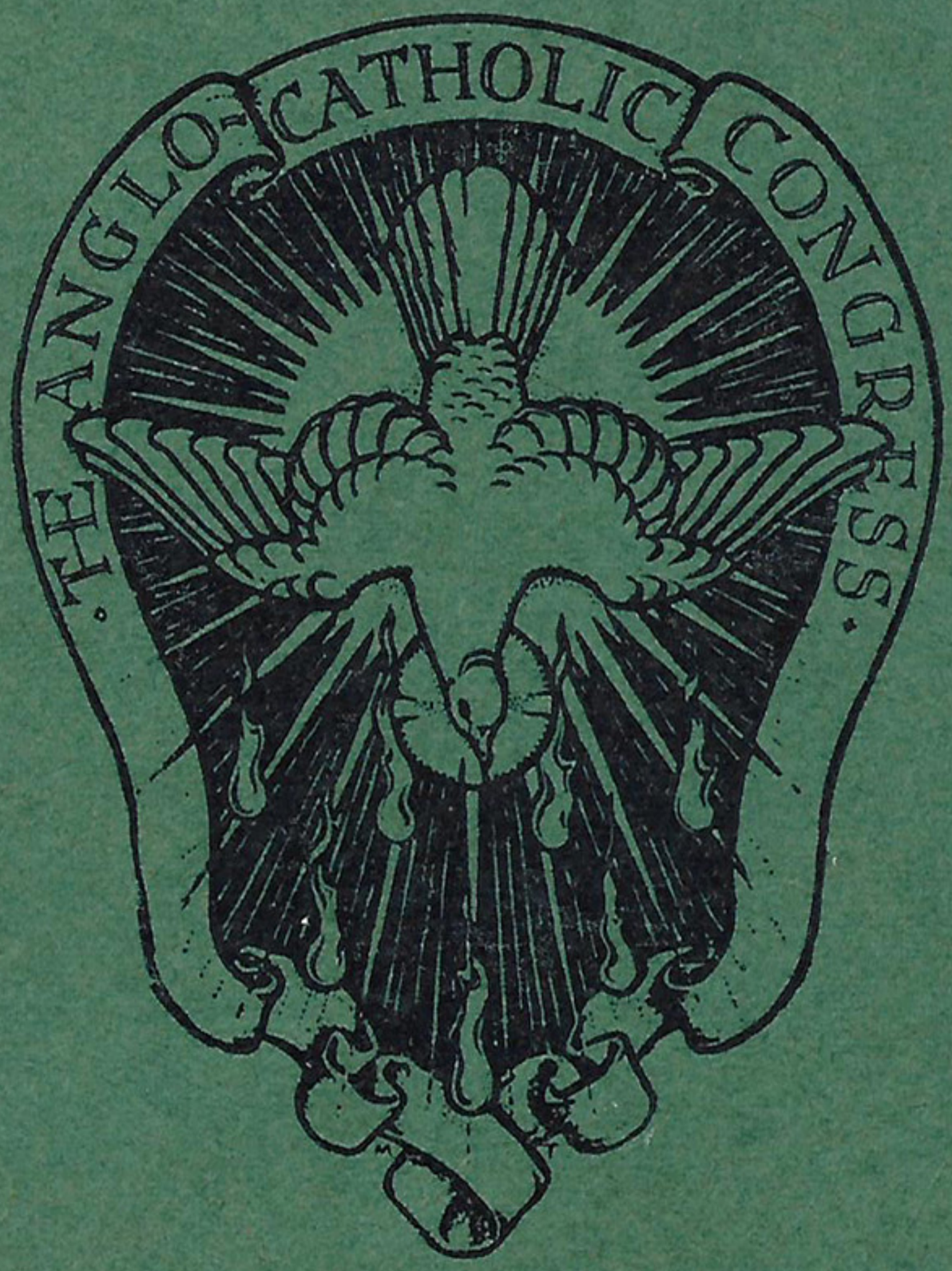
THE CONGRESS BOOKS: No. 49

HEAVEN



By E. GRAHAM

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Examining Chaplain to the Bishop
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THE CONGRESS BOOKS

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HEAVEN

A CATALOGUE BOOK OF THE

Heaven

IT is a matter of common observation that belief in the existence of hell has been widely abandoned in recent years; but it is seldom noticed that belief in heaven has been abandoned scarcely less widely, although more tacitly. In both cases this new attitude, while largely due to slipshod thinking, is in part also a definite reaction from the teaching given in many popular hymns and even in sermons; teaching which strikes the hearer as crude or unreasonable. But whatever the exact cause may be, a man who has abandoned belief in heaven or hell has abandoned an essential part of the Christian faith.

In the subject with which we are now especially concerned, it is perhaps the apparent unreality of the heaven pictured by orthodox Christians which has done most to weaken men's grasp of the underlying truth. Even the imagery of the Revelation of St. John seems sometimes, through its very splendour, to be remote from human life and human needs; while the idea of eternal rest appeals indeed to the aged and weary but not to the young and vigorous. It should be worth

while, then, to ask whether we cannot find some way of regarding heaven which shall make a real appeal to all thoughtful men, and at the same time be thoroughly loyal to the teaching of the New Testament and the Church.

The common idea of heaven as a place of rest which the righteous enter at death or after the last judgement, while essentially true, is capable of misinterpretation, and constantly is misinterpreted, in several ways. Heaven comes to be regarded, for instance, as a place remote from our life on earth; as confined to the future; and as a scene of blissful inactivity. Underlying these three misconceptions is a fourth: heaven is pictured as a material kingdom, and its inhabitants, whether angels or men, as essentially material creatures. In these four points some correction and restatement of popular ideas about heaven is urgently required.

FIRST of all, heaven is not a place remote from this world. 'There is a happy land, far, far away!' says one of our popular hymns for children; hoping no doubt that distance will lend enchantment to the view. But the hope is not always justified; and the view, by its very distance, becomes unreal rather than enchanting. Yet if we are to

think of heaven as a place in the strict sense, we cannot but make it remote from this world. We must indeed, because of the poverty of our language, use in this connexion expressions suggested by the spatial conditions of our earthly existence; we say, for example, 'Our Father which art in heaven,' as if heaven was a place with boundaries and measurements. But what we must avoid is the error of thinking that this local language is adequate to the great realities which we employ it to express.

Thus, in the words just quoted, we are not to think of heaven as an actual place within which God dwells; a local, and therefore limited, region which contains the infinite Maker of all things. If we regard heaven as a place in this strict and literal sense, we make the home of God merely a gilded replica of our own three-dimensional world: the very mistake which the phrase 'in heaven' should help us to avoid. 'Lo, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee' (1 *Kings* viii. 27); God is above and beyond all space; he is confined by no external things; rather, all things exist in him.

So when we speak of God, as 'in heaven,' we mean that he is not limited, as we are, by the spatial conditions of earthly life. We cannot measure the distance between this world and heaven in miles and yards; we cannot approach any nearer to 'the home above' by climbing the highest mountain.

Heaven, in fact, is not a place but a spiritual state or condition; our own nearness to it is measured not by our local or spatial position in the universe, but by our conformity with the will of God.

Secondly, the same line of thought should help us to correct the idea that heaven, for us, lies only in the future. It is true indeed that the consummation of all things has not yet taken place; 'we see not yet all things put under him'; in this sense heaven is a future state. But it is not a future state in the sense that a rigid line can be drawn between this life and the life of the world to come; still less in the sense that all the faithful departed, or all the departed who have not been conspicuously unfaithful, are already in heaven, while even the best and holiest of the living are restricted to some lower condition. Once again it must be emphasized that heaven is a spiritual state; we are not separated from it by years and hours any more than by miles and yards; but by our own spiritual condition.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' The citizenship of heaven is offered to us here and now; here and now the seed of eternal life—the kingdom of God within us—is growing secretly in all hearts which have given it welcome, even though much labour and much pruning may be required before the plant reaches maturity.

Every Christian was made by his baptism 'a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.' And an inheritor is not one who is to inherit in the future, but one who has already entered into the enjoyment of his inheritance. A man may indeed disinherit himself and receive the grace of God in vain ; but in so far as he is conformed to the will of God, and is truly a disciple of Jesus Christ, he is even now in heaven. Thus heaven is not something altogether unconnected with our Christian life here upon earth : on the contrary, 'all the way to heaven is heaven.'

HEAVEN, then, is not a remote place, nor a merely future existence. Nor, thirdly, is it a state of blissful inactivity. Yet the well-known epitaph, in the line,

I'm going to do nothing for ever and ever,

does not seriously misrepresent one very widespread view of heaven. If this view is wrong or overstated, how are we to correct it ? One pregnant verse in the last chapter of the Bible gives us the key : ' His servants shall do him service, and they shall see his face ' (*Rev.* xxii. 3 ff., R.V.). If heaven means anything at all, it must mean perfect joy for the servants of God ; and for those who are trying to be the servants of God there can be no joy so great

as the joy of serving him in the very light of his countenance. The final bliss of heaven must include at least these two ideals—the perfect service of God and the vision of him 'face to face.' And if the former is kept steadily in view, we shall not be in danger of misinterpreting the latter; of so stressing the 'Beatific Vision' of God that we leave out the beatific activity of service.

The very words of welcome spoken in our Lord's parable to the faithful servant, 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord,' are at the same time an invitation to further service: 'Thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will set thee over many things' (*St. Matt.* xxv. 21–23). The very words of the Lord's prayer which ask that God's will may be done upon earth, tell us also that it is done in heaven; the perfect service rendered to God by the angels is the pattern for our own service of him. And this thought of heaven as a state wherein God's servants do him service reinforces our conclusion that it is not remote from this life, but is already ours in so far as we are here and now serving him; in so far as we have here and now attained a vision of him.

What has been said so far does not mean that the full and final bliss of heaven is already ours. In a real sense heaven for us is still future. With God it is an ever-present and eternal reality; but we have not yet attained,

we are not yet made perfect. The vision of God is not granted to men in its fullness during their earthly life; indeed, if it were flashed suddenly upon us in our imperfection and weakness, we should but be dazzled and blinded by its glory. We cannot yet see him face to face, nor know him as we are known of him, nor offer him the perfect service of the angels.

But the truth which we are trying to state is that even for us heaven is present as well as future; near as well as distant; it is in fact the spiritual environment into which we are admitted at baptism by the operation of the Holy Spirit. Even now we can see some reflection of God's likeness, if but darkly. (1 *Cor.* xiii. 12. The 'mirror' referred to in this verse is the ancient, very inadequate mirror of polished metal.) And the clearer our vision of God becomes, and the better our service of him, the more fully shall we be established in heaven; the more completely will our life be 'hid with Christ in God' (*Coloss.* iii. 3). So St. Paul, writing to his fellow Christians, is able to use great words like these: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who'—not, shall bless us, but already—'hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ' (*Ephes.* i. 3, R.V.).[1]

[1] "In the heavenly state" would be a better translation; the word "places" is not in the Greek.

Similarly, what has been said about service as a necessary characteristic of the heavenly state, does not mean that heaven is not also a home of rest and peace. It is still true that 'there remaineth a Sabbath rest for the people of God'; a final haven to which we hope to come when we have passed through the storms of this world, the changes and chances of this mortal life, with all its trials and sorrows and cares.

But this rest is no contented idleness; and those who attain to it 'rest not day nor night from his perfect service.' It is rest because the old things have passed away, and are become new; the burden of earthly frailty has vanished; the irksomeness has gone; and the devil can no more hinder. It is rest, not because there is no activity, but because the activity is wholly in accordance with the will of God, wholly inspired by the vision of him who is Love, and wholly unimpeded by any thought or motive contrary to Love; it is rest because 'he has made us for himself, and our heart knows no rest until it find its rest in him,' and in his perfect service. Heaven is only for those who serve God; and to them it would not be heaven at all—it would not be rest at all—if there were no opportunity for service.

This is no mere paradox, but a deep truth; a truth moreover which we can all in a measure test for ourselves. For even in this life, the

words of Bishop Bickersteth's well-known line are confirmed by all Christian experience:

To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.

In this the angels are our model; for they both 'do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven' (*St. Matt.* xviii. 10), and yet are 'all ministering spirits, sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation' (*Hebr.* i. 14). They unite the restful enjoyment of the Beatific Vision with the active delight of doing God service.

FROM this thought of the angels we may pass on to another, given to us by our Lord himself. His purpose in giving it is to warn us against holding a materialistic view of our life in the world to come; the very view which we have noted as the fourth, and in some ways most fundamental, of the current misconceptions with regard to heaven. The Sadducees, the materialists of our Lord's time, had put before him a problem which they regarded as fatal to belief in a future life—the problem of the woman who had been married to seven husbands in succession. Whose wife was she to be 'in the resurrection'? (*St. Luke* xx. 27 ff.). 'And Jesus said unto them, The sons of this world marry and are given in marriage: but they that are accounted

worthy to attain to that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; for neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.'

They are equal unto the angels; like the angels they enjoy the perfect happiness of at once contemplating and serving God; and like the angels they are free from the old material limitations. Their risen, spiritual bodies know nothing of physical functions, physical needs, physical frailty; but are characterized, as St. Paul tells us (1 *Cor.* xv. 42 ff.), by incorruption, glory, and power; exactly the qualities which our lowly body of flesh and blood most conspicuously lacks.

It is indeed inevitable, when we turn our thoughts to the 'perfect consummation and bliss' which is the ultimate destiny of the faithful, that we should picture the inhabitants of heaven as wearing the human shape so familiar to us in this world. But we need to remind ourselves that such 'picture-thinking' is not a fully true account of the great reality: 'it doth not yet appear what we shall be' (1 *John* iii. 2). Let us by all means make our pictures; but let us remember that they are symbolical, and not photographic reproductions of verities which by their nature can only be spiritually discerned.

Let St. John the Divine be our example;

under his guidance we may visualize, for instance, the Church as the Bride of Christ (*Rev.* xix. 7–9, R.V., and see *Ephes.* v. 25–33) arrayed in fine linen, bright and pure: but at once we must let him remind us that 'the fine linen is'—no material fabric, but—'the righteous acts of the saints;' our picture—his picture—is a piece of spiritual symbolism, and not a prosaic description of something solid and tangible. In this sense we are to understand the whole of his book: the harps of the harpers, the thrones of the elders, the trumpets and censers of the angels; all that he sees through the door opened in heaven.

And if we make pictures of heaven for ourselves after his example, we must be careful to understand them also in the same sense. Otherwise we shall be cherishing materialistic conceptions like those which our Lord condemned in his answer to the Sadducees; conceptions which obscure the true nature of heaven, and its true relation to ourselves, both now and hereafter.

WE have spoken of heaven as a spiritual state or condition; and of ourselves as already enjoying it, ascending thither in heart and mind, in proportion as we are conformed to the will of God; seeing the vision of him and doing him service. This does not

mean that we ourselves make heaven by our own efforts; but that by using the faculty of faith which God has bestowed upon us we enter more and more fully into the heavenly inheritance to which he has called us; the things which he himself has prepared for them that love him. Here, as always, 'it is the gift of God.' But just because it is his gift, there rests upon us a responsibility proportionate to the privilege which he offers; the responsibility of being in a right relationship with God. For us the whole vast difference between heaven and hell depends upon this relationship. And if we are seeking for a clear idea of what heaven is, and how we may represent it to ourselves most truly, we cannot do better than concentrate our thoughts upon God himself.

God, and not heaven—in so far as we can make the distinction at all—is the ultimate reality, the beginning and the end of our religion, the object of our hope, the source and goal of our life. If we find him, heaven is found; but if we seek for heaven in any way apart from him, we can never find it. For life eternal—which is heaven—is this: that we 'should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ' (*St. John* xvii. 3, R.V.). It is because God himself, God in Christ, is the centre, indeed the very whole, of our religion, that we can best think of heaven not as a place, nor merely

as one of the 'last things,' nor merely as a state of rest, but as a relationship to a person, the personal Maker and Ruler of all things, revealed to us personally in his eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Heaven is no merely indefinite vision, service, and rest; it is vision of God, service of God, and rest in God.

The heavenly and heavenward life, planted in us as a seed at baptism, springs up and grows within men's hearts, except in so far as they themselves check it, by the hidden ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is a secret ministry, marked by no earthquake or wind or fire; the superficial observer cannot say 'lo, here! or lo, there!—for the kingdom of God is within you' (*St. Luke* xvii. 21). For those who have eyes to see, the results of his activity are manifest; 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control,' (*Galat.* v. 22 ff.), the very mind of Christ. Thus, and only thus, there is 'richly supplied unto you the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.' For it is only as men allow themselves to be led by the Spirit that their lives come to be hid with Christ in God; there is no royal road to heaven; or rather, there is no road except this truly royal one.

Along this road have travelled and are travelling all the departed who have fallen asleep in Christ in all ages of Christianity.

Some of these—those to whom we give the title of 'Saint' in a special sense—we are encouraged to think of as already 'in heaven' in a fuller measure than the rest, because they responded to the grace of God more unreservedly, and so have travelled much further along the road. The great majority of the Christian dead we think of as still advancing along the road, beyond the veil, being trained more fully for the perfect service of God, and being purified more and more from all earthly taint, that they may be fitted at last to behold God face to face in the Beatific Vision. And we who are still in the flesh are advancing along the same road, unless we have received the grace of God in vain; we have not yet attained, but our citizenship is even now in heaven; 'for as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God;' and the road—the Way by which he leads them—is Christ himself.

'Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God. . . Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is' (1 *John* iii. 1 ff.).

'His servants shall do him service: and they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads . . . and they shall reign for ever and ever' (*Rev.* xxii. 3–5, R.V.).

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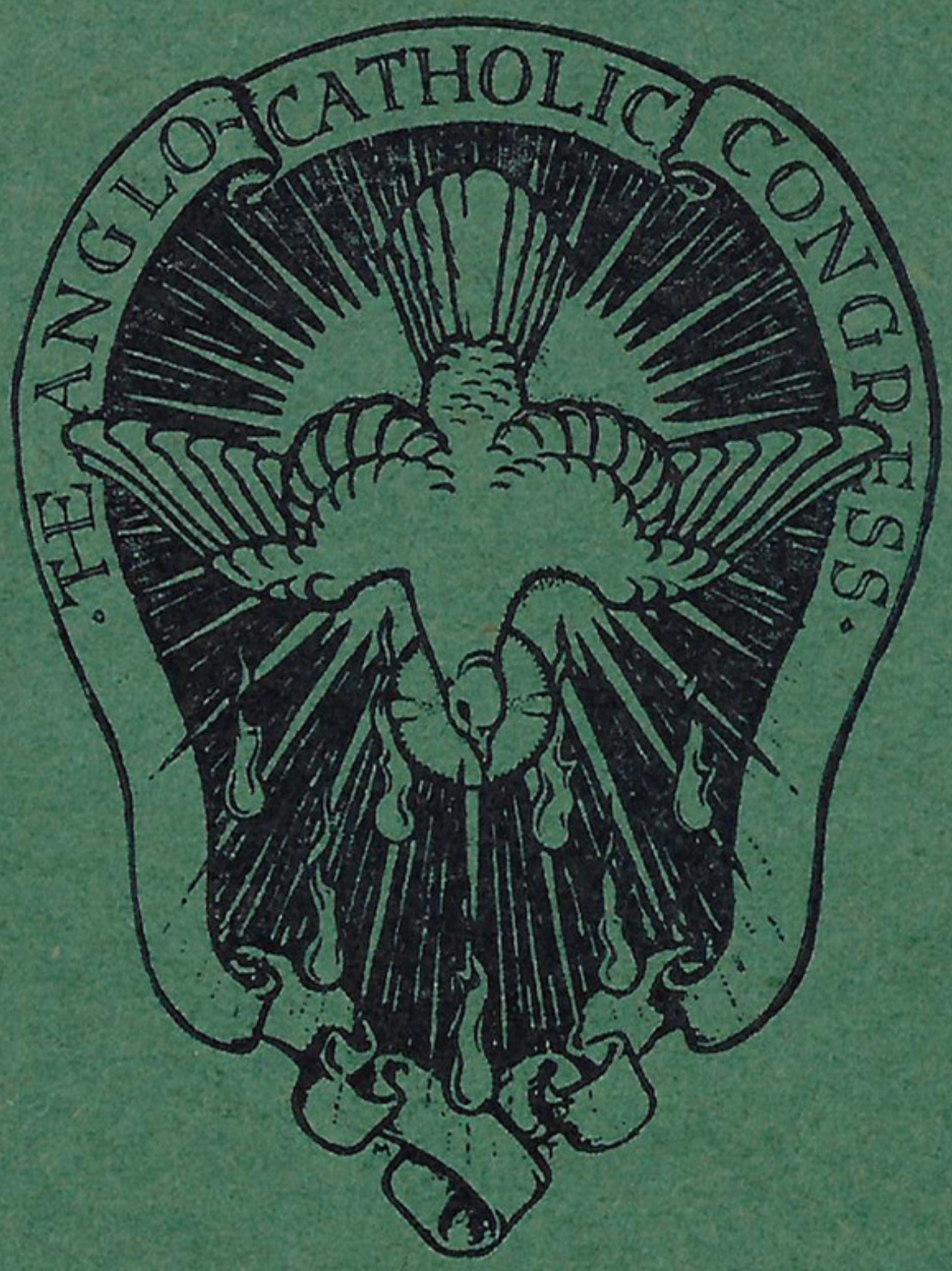

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